

# WASHINGTON HERITAGE REGISTER

## A) Identification

Historic Name: **First Congregational Church of Sylvan**  
Common Name: Fox Island United Church of Christ, Chapel on Echo Bay  
Address: 400 Sixth Avenue  
City: Fox Island County: Pierce

## B) Site Access (describe site access, restrictions, etc.)

From Gig Harbor, take Warren Drive NW, cross the Fox Island Bridge, heading south on the Fox Island Bridge Road. Continue on Fox Island Bridge Road which will turn into Island Blvd. In approximately 1.5 miles, turn left onto Fox Drive and then take next left to 6<sup>th</sup> Avenue. The Chapel is ½ mile on the left.

## C) Property owner(s), Address and Zip

Name: Fox Island Chapel Preservation Society  
Address: 400 Sixth Avenue  
City: Fox Island State: WA Zip: 98333

## D) Legal boundary description and boundary justification

Tax No./Parcel: 5875000340(Building) and 5875000387 (Parking)  
Boundary Justification: Both parcels, covering the Chapel Building and its parking lot are the boundary of the nomination.

## FORM PREPARED BY

Name:	Julie Herling	(Edited by DAHP Staff)
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City / State / Zip:	Gig Harbor, WA 98335	Phone: 253.549.8916
Email:	jherling@gmail.com	Nomination 1/20/2022
		Date:

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## E) Category of Property (Choose One)

- ☒ building ☐ structure (irrigation system, bridge, etc.) ☐ district  
☐ object (statue, grave marker, vessel, etc.) ☐ cemetery/burial site  
☐ historic site (site of an important event) ☐ archaeological site  
☐ traditional cultural property (spiritual or creation site, etc.)  
☐ cultural landscape (habitation, agricultural, industrial, recreational, etc.)

## F) Area of Significance – Check as many as apply

- ☒ The property belongs to the early settlement, commercial development, or original native occupation of a community or region.
- ☒ The property is directly connected to a movement, organization, institution, religion, or club which served as a focal point for a community or group.
- ☒ The property is directly connected to specific activities or events which had a lasting impact on the community or region.
- ☐ The property is associated with legends, spiritual or religious practices, or life ways which are uniquely related to a piece of land or to a natural feature.
- ☐ The property displays strong patterns of land use or alterations of the environment which occurred during the historic period (cultivation, landscaping, industry, mining, irrigation, recreation).
- ☐ The property is directly associated with an individual who made an important contribution to a community or to a group of people.
- ☐ The property has strong artistic, architectural or engineering qualities, or displays unusual materials or craftwork belonging to a historic era.
- ☐ The property was designed or built by an influential architect, or reflects the work of an important artisan.
- ☐ Archaeological investigation of the property has or will increase our understanding of past cultures or life ways.

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## **G) Property Description**

The First Congregational Church of Sylvan is located on 70 feet of waterfront property and comprises a one-quarter acre parcel off Sylvan Cove on Fox Island in Pierce County. At the turn of the last century, its waterside view was the front of the building and was apparent to the many marine passengers and operators traversing Hale Passage by small boat, mosquito fleet ferry or steamer. Many of these vessels stopped to load and unload passengers and cargo just steps away from the church at the busy Sylvan dock. The Sylvan dock has since been removed, and what was large platted farming acreage, has been replaced by large homes and private docks. The Church is now the oldest building on Sylvan Cove and the only building left from what was the community of Sylvan.

The church is a one-story rectangular building with a daylight basement. It currently rests on a concrete block foundation, installed in the 1950s. The cross-gable roof has boxed eaves with shallow cornice returns, and is clad with asphalt shingles. Painted white, the exterior facades are highlighted by a vertical wainscoting up to the window sill level, which then transitions to horizontal weatherboard siding to the eave line.

The steeple, located at the transition of the gable roofs (on the water side of the building), is 10' x 10' in size and rises to a height of 50 feet. Divided into three sections, the steeple maintains the siding profiles of the main building and then transitions to an 8' section of coursed shingles defined by a flared base supported by small modillions. Above is another 8' section housing the bell and louvered screens on all four sides. This section is clad in horizontal siding. Capping the steeple is a steeply pitched pyramidal roof, clad with asphalt shingles and topped with a round-ball finial. The pyramidal roof is defined by a deep cornice with scallop-shaped modillions.

Windows to the building are a variety of shapes, sizes and types. Most are not original to the church, but date from the 1950s remodel. The south sanctuary windows consist of a group of three bays, defined by a fixed unit flanked with casement style windows with molted yellow glass. Per historic images these windows are smaller in size than the original windows. The water or west façade of the sanctuary features a large window wall, Palladian in style. Installed during the 1950s remodel, the central window contained a large stained glass cross. Other windows are fixed pane and one-over-one double hung units.

The main floor of the church houses the sanctuary, a small side room and an office. The sanctuary was reconfigured during the 1950s remodel and the congregation now faces the water. The space has beadboard wainscoting, and vertical board walls. The vaulted ceiling is clad in acoustical tile. Lighting is limited to wall sconces and can lights in the pitch of the ceiling. The chancel area consists of a carpeted raised platform. New oak flooring was installed as part of the rehabilitation work (2018). The original pews were replaced in the 1950s with the current pews (17 in total). Two of the original pews are now on display at the Fox Island Historical Society Museum.

When the entrance to the church was moved from the waterside, the stairs were removed, the landing was enclosed and the base of the steeple was converted to office space. A new entry was also constructed on the east side of the building which provided a small narthex and an enclosed stairwell to the basement. Both the narthex and entry have corresponding gable roofs with the same pitch as that of the main building. The floors are covered with tile and the double entry doors to the sanctuary are paned wood units. The south window in the narthex boasts a newer stained glass window.

During the 1950s remodel, a completely new ground floor was dug beneath the original building which included installing a new concrete foundation. The change doubled the available size of the entire church to over 3,000 square feet. The new ground floor provided room for classrooms and a fellowship hall. The basement also included indoor plumbing with toilets and electricity for the first time, replacing a wood-burning stove. The basement space has since been remodeled and contains updated fixtures and finishes from the recent rehabilitation.

In 1967, 15 feet of waterfront was added to the property. The congregation also received a gift of land between the entrance of the church and 6<sup>th</sup> Avenue where parking was added. This east side of the property is primarily asphalt.

The original "Eells Bell" and its accessories were removed soon after the sale to the Chapel Preservation Society in 2000. The original bell was reinstalled at the new building for the Fox Island United Church of Christ.

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## **H) Significance**

The First Congregational Church of Sylvan on Fox Island is historically significant as a building that represents the spiritual needs and aspirations of the small community of Sylvan. The church, constructed in 1900, is a representative example of the type of rural ecclesiastical architecture that was built at the turn-of-the-century across the state. The eclectic nature of the design is reflective of its construction date, and the skills of its builders. The architect for the church is unknown, however newspaper accounts note that the building committee came to Tacoma "to complete plans and arrangements for the building," hence it most likely was designed by an architect.

The community of Sylvan, where the church is located, was developed by Andrew J. Miller, one of the earliest non-Native American settlers on Fox Island. Arriving in 1889 with his adult son, the two farmers from Iowa had made the long journey by train, stagecoach, and steamboat, finally arriving at their destination on Echo Bay by dugout canoe. They debarked on the shores with enough provisions to stay a month looking for a place to develop a small utopian community.

Miller liked what he saw on the shores of the island (later to be known as Sylvan Cove), particularly the moderate climate, stands of timber, abundant fish and shellfish, game, wild berries, fruit and fertile soil. He and his family soon purchased 86 heavily wooded acres and began to develop homestead sites for a future community. Miller was a devoutly religious man, and had a vision to build a community of Christian friends and neighbors. Back in his hometown in Grinnell, Iowa, he campaigned to attract like-minded, well-educated, and financially established friends and neighbors to purchase rural plats at a cost of \$20 an acre. Many of those he approached were from his former Congregational Church and he offered them the opportunity to join him and others in building a life of promise and adventure in new, sturdy homesteads. In the end, thirteen families agreed to make the initial commitment to what was originally called the "Sylvan-Glen Colony."

Integral to the community was the establishment of a church. First organized in 1892, for several years meetings were held in private homes on the island. In-home church services included visits by pastors, Sunday School classes, Bible studies, children's activities and other social events. By January 1900, the growing congregation formally filed their incorporation papers with the state. Mrs. E.J. Bixby served as president, E.C. Miller was appointed secretary, and T.H. Bixby served as treasurer. Three others constituted a board of trustees.

In time, the Sylvan community expanded beyond the church and included a library, a historical society, a water company, an electric company, a fruit and vegetable evaporator facility, a navigation and dry dock company, and even a telephone company. Their formal and informal get-togethers made those in Sylvan an organized, self-sufficient, closely-knit community. While Miller passed away in 1898 at the age of 78, the community continued to thrive. He had donated land over-looking the Sound and the Olympic Mountains to the congregation for the future home of a church building.

To fund the construction of the church building, the congregation sought and received a grant for \$958.75 from the Congregational Church Building Society of New York. Reportedly plans were drawn up via a committee, but newspaper articles note that the building committee had traveled to Tacoma to "arrange plans".

By April of 1900 construction of the church was underway with a core group of volunteer men and women. The lumber was sourced from the St. Paul & Tacoma Lumber Company and arrived at the Sylvan dock in February of 1900.

The newly built church (christened the First Congregational Church of Sylvan) was dedicated in a ceremony on August 19, 1900, with eighteen official members and many guest from Sylvan and Fox Island in attendance. Dedication services were provided by Rev. H.M. Freeland of Seattle, and assisted by Revs. Baily and Green from Seattle, Rev. Ford of Tacoma, and President Stephen B.J. Penrose of Whitman College. In addition to its new sanctuary, the steeple housed a hand-rung "Eells Bell". The bell was gifted to the church by Rev. Cushing Eells son, Edwin (owner of the bell at the time). Rev. Eells had originally gifted the bell to the Atkinson Memorial Church in Tacoma which had disbanded in 1898. It was one of nine bells that were gifted to congregations across the state by Rev Eells, the first and long-time Home Missionary Superintendent of Washington and one of the pillars of Congregationalism in Washington state. Rev. Eells adult son, Edwin and his grandson, were frequent visitors to Sylvan, and both were on hand at the dedication ceremony. They rang the bell for the first church service.

Over the years, the congregation was served by twenty-three pastors until it closed in 1999. Some were traveling itinerant pastors, others visiting pastors from nearby congregations. The Rev. O.C. Anderson was the first official pastor to be called by the church in 1901. He had an annual salary of \$75 a year, but the congregation also supplied him with a parsonage. In 1906, the Rev. Frank Bentley was called. He received \$700 a year, of which \$200 was supplied by the Home Mission Society.

Eventually Fox Island grew with permanent and temporary residents, increasing from about 50 residents to nearly 300 by the 1940s. While several other communities were created beyond Sylvan on the island, the Congregational Church remained the only church on Fox Island and was known locally as the "Community Church". Eventually roads replaced dirt paths, including the building of the Bulkhead Road in front of the Chapel, constructed during the Depression era by the US Civilian Conservation Corps. As ferry service to the island increased, additional homes, farms and small businesses sprung up.

Local writers, including Chauncey Wight, the son of the first grocer and later a grocer himself at the Sylvan Dock Store c.1904-1949, described the sense of community that was at Sylvan during these years. He noted the good fortune residents and visitors alike had with enough to eat, items to barter, and wood to keep warm. Like many of the youth on Fox Island, he attended Sunday school, church and social events at the "Community Church", which was next door to their store.

In 1954, the completion of a two-lane bridge, connecting the island to the "mainland" of Gig Harbor on the Olympic Peninsula, changed life on the island. The addition of cars on the few roads of Fox Island was soon followed by new roads, including 6<sup>th</sup> Avenue, on the east side / rear of the church. The change from less dependence on water transportation and the introduction of cars to the mainland, prompted major renovations to be made to the church in 1955. These included reconfiguring the main entrance to the church to the east side of the building, building out the basement where a kitchen and gathering space was added, and installing electricity, plumbing

and indoor bathrooms for the first time.

Worship and community events continued to take place in the remodeled building. It became a favorite wedding venue. Archives from 1955 to 1999 reveal the church hosted approximately 800 weddings. Following the national Congregational Church body which changed their name to the United Church of Christ in 1961, the First Congregational Church of Sylvan changed its name to the Fox Island United Church of Christ.

In 1984, a second church came to Fox Island, the Alliance Church of Fox Island. Both churches enjoyed healthy memberships and education programs. However, the limitation on space for the United Church of Christ, including an inadequate septic system and erosion of the waterfront property line, became a major concern for the congregation. Seeking a long-term solution for the aging facility, the congregation acquired a five-acre plot approximately 1.2 miles south for the eventual construction of a new sanctuary.

After moving to a new facility, in 1999 the congregation decided to sell their original 1900 building. Seeing potential as a small wedding venue and gathering space, a local non-profit community-based group, the Fox Island Chapel Preservation Society, was formed. They launched a funding drive to cover the fair market value of the church and the projected restoration costs. Over 300 individual donations were contributed. The year-long funding campaign collected donations at special events on Fox Island and by issuing targeted mailings. After purchasing the church, they officially renamed the church the "Chapel on Echo Bay" and started rehabilitating the church to serve as a community gathering space. Their charter included providing a space for events including history and educational programs, an artist gallery, and concerts. To provide additional revenue, the building would continue to be used as wedding chapel and reception venue.

The Fox Island Chapel Preservation Society met all of its initial funding needs and restoration plans in 2003. Today the church continues to host numerous concerts, historical events and lectures, fairs, auctions for charity, memorials, social events and weddings. Annual visitors to the building remain in the 4,000 range. The majority of the administration and maintenance of the building and grounds is provided by local community volunteers from the Fox Island Chapel Preservation Society and the Fox Island Sand & Soil Garden Club.

## **Annotated Roster of Pastors (with service dates) -**

Rev. O.C. Anderson (1901-1903)  
Rev. Charles E Philbrook (1903-1905)  
Rev. Frank D. Bentley (1906 - 1906)  
Rev. Frank C. Nevius (1911-1915)  
Rev. Francis J. Wrigley (1916 – 1933)  
Rev. Agnes Anderson (1933-34)  
Rev. M. Hoaglund (1934-1936)  
Rev. Herbert West (1936-1939)  
Rev. Frederick Amos (1939 - 1946)  
Rev. M. Corell (1946-1948)  
Rev. Roland Schluster (1947-1948)  
Rev. Herbert West (1948-1949)  
Rev. Lee W. Lynne (1949-1953)  
Rev. Walter Pierson (1953-1957)  
Rev. George Nelson (1957-1960)  
Rev. Merlin Nelson (1960-1962)  
Rev. Fred Opperman (1962-1975)  
Rev. James B. Wilson (1975-1981)  
Rev. John Westhaver (1981-1985)  
Rev. Bruce L. Kline (1985-1995)  
Rev. B.J. Beu (1996-1999)





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## I) Documentation

Xerox and attach any information or evidence that supports the property's significance.

- 1) Chauncy Wight Sunday School Attendance Record, c. 1930
- 2) Congressional Church Record, 1944, showing Sylvan Church;
- 3) First Congregational Church of Sylvan, Register of Marriages starting in 1955;
- 4) "Our Church Greeting", First Congregational Church, Grinnell, Iowa, 11/5/1958;
- 5) Tacoma News Tribune and Sunday Ledger, 10/1967;
- 6) Peninsula Gateway, photo, 6/9/1981;
- 7) Peninsula Gateway, photo, 2/21/1990;
- 8) Fox Island UCC Pastor BJ Beu message on Community 1/1999;
- 9) Tacoma News Tribune, articles, 1/4/2000;

**Written Sources** (books, articles, newspapers):

### Books:

- Macdonald, Alexis, *Fox Island, Its History and Development*, self-published, 1966, pages 4, 12-15, 30, 36, 39, 78, 91, 97, 108, 110, 133.
- Miller, George L., *Fox Island, A History*, the Fox Island Historical Society, 1993, pages 50-54.
- Perisho, Caroline, *Fox Island, Pioneer Life on Southern Puget Sound*, Echo Bay Press, 1990, pages 1-10, 83-89.
- Wight, Chauncey, *Echoes of Yesterday on Fox Island*, self-published, 2002, pages 5-10, 111-115.

### Articles/Documents:

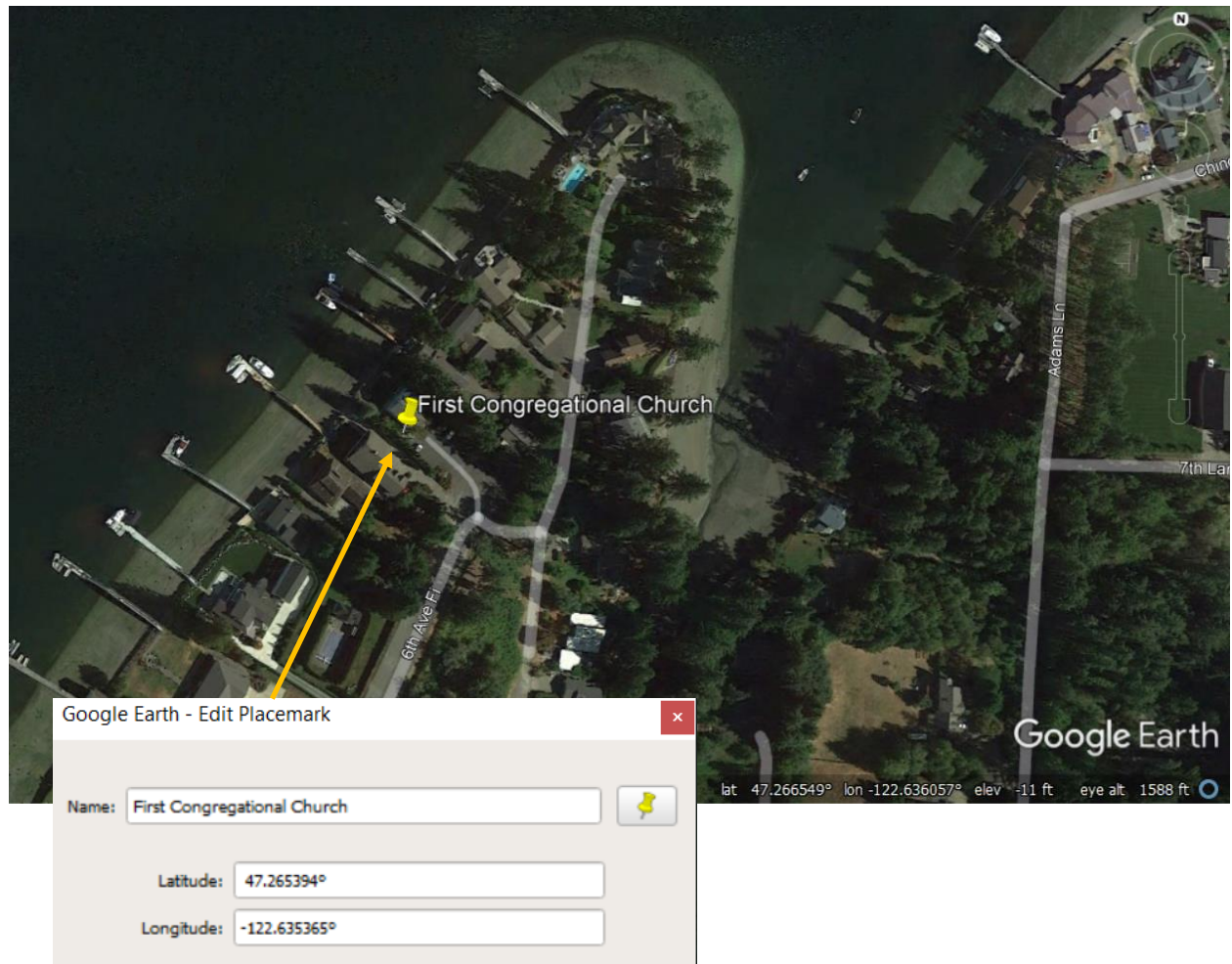
- 1) Numerous Church Bulletins from First Congregational Church of Sylvan and Fox Island United Church of Christ, United Church of Christ archives and Fox Island Historical Society Museum archives 1900-1999; and
- 2) Grulich Architectural Report, Tacoma Washington, Chapel on Echo Bay archives, 1991;
- 3) April 2000 Chapel on Echo Bay Restoration Plan, Chapel on Echo Bay archives;
- 4) 2006 Nomination to Pierce County for Chapel on Echo Bay Inclusion on Pierce County Register of Historic Places, Ordinance 2006-93 Approved, Chapel on Echo Bay archives;
- 5) WA State Department of Archeological and Historic Preservation website, Robert L. Durham, Architect Biography and Project List, compiled by Michael Houser, State Architectural Historian, November 2017;
- 6) Tacoma News Tribune Article of 5/16/2018 "County Grant Preserves the Romance on Fox Island" from Chapel on Echo Bay archives.

### Oral History/Interviews:

Sandy Mowry, former President, Fox Island Chapel Preservation Society and Historian, Fox Island Historical Society;  
Tony Moore, current, Board of Directors Fox Island Historical Society and Board of Directors, Fox Island Chapel Preservation Society, 2000-2018;  
Virdie Golliher, current, Board of Directors Fox Island Historical Society and Board of Directors, Fox Island Chapel Preservation Society, 2009-18.

## J) Map and Photographs

Attach copies of historic maps or photos if available, and current photos (min 5 x 7 digital images, 300 DPI). Include a current map – appropriate Google Earth/U.S.G.S. map and parcel map – with the location of the property and its boundaries clearly marked. (see instructions)





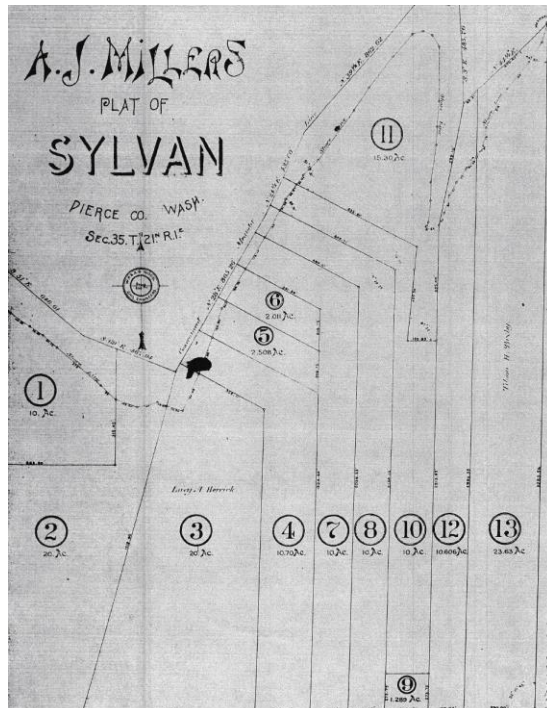
*Disclaimer: The map features are approximate and have not been surveyed. Additional features not yet mapped may be present. Pierce County assumes no liability for variations ascertained by formal survey.*

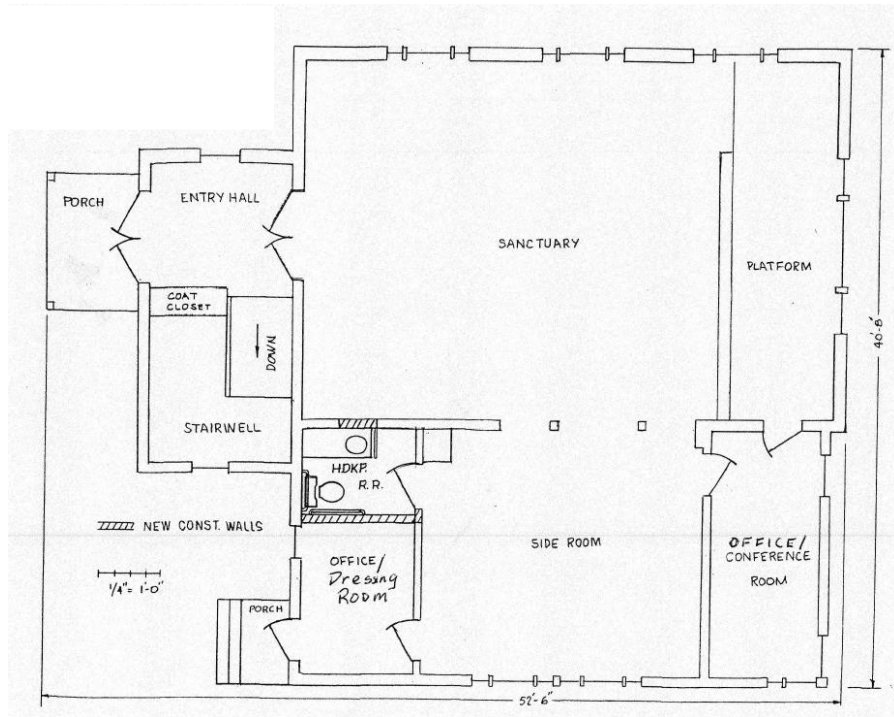
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## First Congregational Church

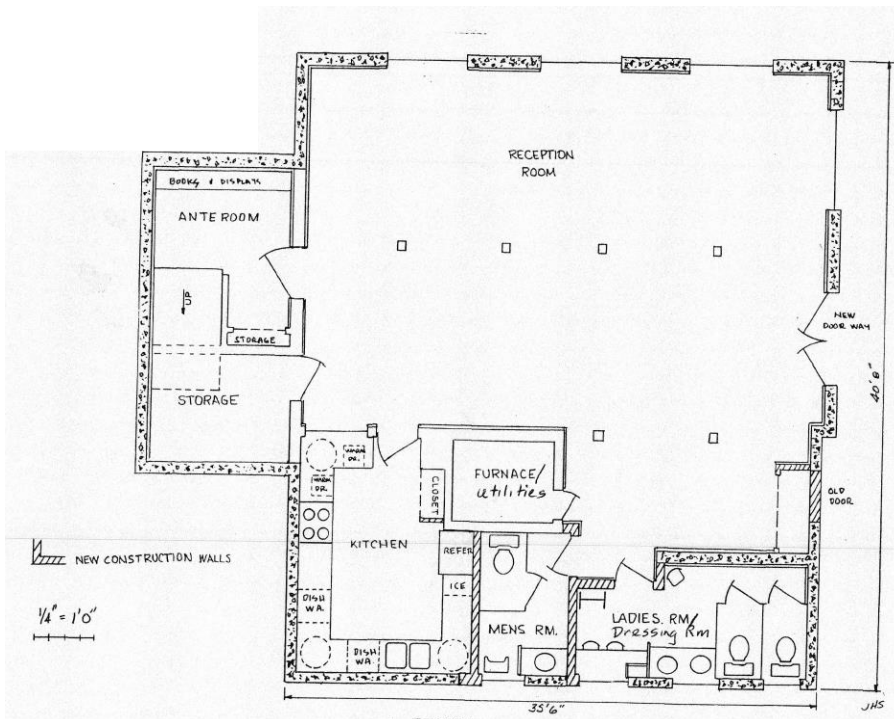
### Plat Map

Fox Island, WA





Main Floor



Basement Floor

## First Congregational Church

### Floor Plans

Fox Island, WA





First Congregational Church – Fox Island, c1903

Image from: Fox Island Pioneer Life on the Puget Sound, Echo Bay Press, 1990.



First Congregational Church – Fox Island, c1907

Images Courtesy of Fox Island Historical Society.



Interior view of sanctuary. Note that until the 1950s, the pews faced east and the main entrance to the building was at the NW corner through the base of the steeple. When it was decided to reverse the floorplan, a new entrance at the east end of the church was built.

Image Courtesy of Fox Island Historical Society.



Rev. Francis Wrigley, known as the “Musical Pastor”, carried two violins wherever he went. Born and educated in England, Wrigley served the congregation for 13 years.

Image Courtesy of Fox Island Historical Society.



## Current Images – First Congregational Church





